



# USING ETHNICITY IN URBAN ARCHAEOLOGY

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**U**rban historical archaeologists follow redevelopment like crows follow the plow. And since poor, ethnically uniform neighborhoods are often the targets of these mass-transit, residential, and industrial redevelopment schemes, these are the places where we tend to work.

Don't get me wrong: an issue of *The SAA Archaeological Record* on the topic of ethnicity in archaeology is a good idea. But it does rather presuppose that investigating the concept of ethnicity *per se* is "the thing." If we were to ask a descendant of the people we study about this idea, he or she is likely to scratch their head. For non-archaeologists, there are far more interesting, historically grounded stories to be told. So I don't begin to construct a research design with abstract concepts like ethnicity but by identifying the themes that drove the history of this location. "Place" is where I begin, because (if you'll excuse my truism) it's where people live; its history embodies their experience.

And a key question is how a place comes to be the target for redevelopment.

## **Earthquake!**

West Oakland, California is a predominantly Black neighborhood with more than its share of decaying houses and a fearful murder rate. Prospering through the industrial development of the mid-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, African Americans were hard hit by the post-World War II decline in skilled industrial jobs. By the 1960s, the neighborhood had been decimated by both unemployment and the government policy of urban redevelopment.

After the 1987 Loma Prieta earthquake destroyed a sizable chunk of the freeway that bisected the area, the California Department of Transportation funded Sonoma State University to spend over a year in the field and far longer than that researching and excavating the household goods of families who lived here from the 1860s to about 1910. Most were first-generation immigrants: Irish, Germans, Italians, and eastern European Jews. Others were native-born: Whites from the Northeast and African Americans from the South. Almost all came for steady jobs on the Central Pacific Railroad, which terminated in West Oakland.

One of the smartest things we did at the outset of our research was to talk to Robert Haynes, curator of the African American Museum and Library at Oakland. What issues, we asked, did he think we should be investigating? Robert, an anthropologist by training and a historian by inclination, was initially bemused by a question that might turn out to be nothing more than a politically correct gambit and a waste of his time. But Robert was willing to humor us. He pointed out that many nineteenth-century African Americans were employed by the railroad and were active union members. Was there an archaeological tie-in, he asked? And, more to the point, were the results of our project going to mean anything to modern Oaklanders, who surely have more pressing things to think about?

As the project developed, it became clear that the West Oakland of 1880 and of recent years were worlds apart.

### A Black Household, 1880s

Lucinda Tilghman lived at 662 Fifth Street. An African American widow with three children, she took in boarders, including Abraham Holland, a Pullman porter employed by the railroad. The artifact collection from Tilghman's backyard privy complex is a window into the household in about 1880 (Figure 1). Dining was formal, as reflected in the tea and liquor service. Meals featured high-priced beef loin steaks and roasts, ham, and leg of mutton. Many personal items also found their way into the refuse, including an elegant toiletry set, a cuff link, a gold pendant, and a gold earring, all of which speak to the household's refinement.



Figure 1: Artifacts from the Tilghman/Holland household. After the privy was no longer needed, it was filled in about 1880 with the domestic refuse pictured here.

### Urban Renewal, 1930s–1960s

Although West Oakland was designated a “blighted” district in 1949, New Deal progressives had been busy in the neighborhood since the late 1930s, when several blocks of eclectic but decaying Victorian-era residences were declared a slum, condemned, and replaced with rows of austere, concrete, International-style apartment buildings. Peralta Villa, one of the first public housing projects in California, was completed in 1942. The uniformity and openness of the concrete block rows provided a clear line for surveillance. Privacy was a thing of the past.

In the 1950s, the double-deck Cypress Freeway was built, bisecting West Oakland with a massive physical and visual barrier. Again, despite neighborhood opposition, homes were destroyed and families relocated. In 1958, Oakland's Redevelopment Agency concluded that 12 West Oakland blocks should be cleared for Project Gateway, a huge postal facility. Despite the haste with which the old houses were razed, construction did not begin until 1966. In the intervening years, the vacant lots became an *ad hoc* dumping ground.

### Comparing the 1880s and the 1960s

Unceremoniously discarded on an empty lot by anonymous West Oaklanders in the early 1960s are artifacts that make for an interesting comparison with materials from the previous century (Figure 2). This collection didn't meet the criteria for study in our approved research design, so we did the analysis without outside support. We found that the same classes of artifacts are present in both collections, sometimes with different representations: electrical parts substitute for lamp chimneys and among the toys is a model airplane. There are also unexpectedly few alcohol bottles in the community dump of the

1960s compared with the household assemblages of the previous century. Some of the latter contained dozens of beer and spirit containers in spite of the fact that these bottles could be sold for cash to junk dealers. Large-scale bottle collection and reuse was in the past by the mid-twentieth century while domestic recycling had yet to establish itself. Several milk bottles were found in the 1960s collection; the manufacturers intended these to be returned and reused. Conversely, the 1960s assemblage contains a proportionally larger quantity of cleaning products (including Clorox, Pinex, and car wax) in comparison to the earlier collections.



Figure 2: Following the demolition of several blocks for redevelopment, the open space became a community dumping ground. This collection was deposited in the early 1960s.

The nineteenth-century assemblages contain many items in the health and grooming categories that include pomade and perfume, as well as artifacts used in the hope of preventing or treating disease. With a century's advancements in medicine, decline might be predicted in the use of home medicines for treatment. However, both personal beautification products and proprietary medicines are as plentiful in the later assemblage as in those from the previous century, reflecting the poor access to health care in 1960s West Oakland.

While the food preparation and serving items are very diverse in age, decoration, and quality, they are relatively homogeneous in function. Typically, the 19th-century collections from West Oakland contain a dizzying range of table and serving vessels: plates, bowls, cups, covered tureens, and jugs of various sizes and shapes according to their function. This variety reflects the formal dining practices that were so important in mid- and late-nineteenth-century family homes. Dining was a highly ritualized activity that reaffirmed one's place in society and relation to genteel culture. In their uniformity, matched sets of dinnerware embodied that formality. A century later, dining had lost much of its symbolism. Although a community dump may not be the most controlled source of data, these materials suggest that achieving the aesthetic of the matched dining set was no longer important and that formal dining was much reduced.

### Ethnicity and Place

More than a century has passed since West Oakland experienced the fluorescence of its skilled working class. For its first 60 years, this was a multiethnic place. Later, a massive population increase, government sanctioned policies of discrimination, the loss of the traditional employment base, and notions of "blight" and "slum" were used to justify re-engineering the neighborhood.

The Black Power movement of the 1960s originated, in part, in the powerlessness of West Oaklanders to save their homes, business, and vibrant culture from what were seen as the arbitrary ravages of a distant bureaucracy. The Black Panther Party had deep roots in the area and its social issues—in 1970, Party headquarters was located on Peralta Street, not far from the Project Gateway postal facility. The

infamous October 1967 shootout between the Oakland police and Huey Newton occurred across the street from Project Gateway. Newton was murdered in West Oakland in 1989. The leveling of West Oakland contributed to rampant paranoia within the African American community in the late 1960s. "Urban renewal" was seen as a ploy to further disenfranchise the poor. Many Black nationalists fervently believed that the U.S. government had genocidal intentions, finding proof of this Machiavellian scheme in the use of their neighborhood for freeways, mass-transit projects, and urban renewal (Figure 3).

Archaeological remains show these transitions in their structure as well as their content; in spite of the prejudices of the time, the residents of Lucinda Tilghman's home were socially active, entrepreneurial, and sophisticated. Her parlor items suggest a proudly genteel household. Significantly, the objects themselves were discarded into an outdoor privy that had been made redundant by the installation of City services. One is left with an impression of the optimism of this era, in which material progress had been tremendous and social advancement could not be far behind. Eighty years later, the *ad hoc* mounds of refuse left by chronically unemployed people housed in government projects in the early 1960s are both physical evidence and a metaphor of the change that swept the area. Optimism had retreated before the hard reality of continued racial injustice. The material plenty of an earlier era was nowhere to be seen in 1960s West Oakland. Self-determination, as symbolized by homeownership, had been in reach of the skilled workers of Lucinda Tilghman's day. By the 1960s, it was impossible for most people, whose homes were likely to be concrete blockhouses.

### A Nice Pat on the Head

After the West Oakland project was completed, we posted the archaeological report on our website at <http://www.sonoma.edu/asc> and asked for comments. One morning this message popped up in my email box:

I live in west Oakland and saw you digging near to the Post Office building. I liked how this project was about the neighborhood which is mostly known for what is wrong in Oakland. You have put us on the map I think. The project shows African Americans have lived in the area for a long time and how the area changed.

A single email from one individual isn't much, but it does hint that our work had struck a cord with the people whose history we interpreted, people who care about this place. Although our research design said some "highfalutin" things about investigating the situational nature of ethnic identity, I'm not sure that we discovered much new about the concept itself. But so what? Ethnicity is a tool that we used to get somewhere else.

"The point isn't the finding out," quoth an anonymous sage, "but the *trying* to find out." 📷



Figure 3: This undated line drawing of the "Peralta Villa concentration camp" reflected local sentiment about public housing projects that contributed to the creation of the Black Panther Party. One of the Party's principles was "decent housing fit for the shelter of human beings."